

**all bruised up grace and stolen light by
10pintsofsacrifice**

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Anxiety, Coping, Depression, Derealization, Disabled Character, Eleven's POV, F/M, Flashbacks, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, Minor Body Horror, Modern AU, Panic Attacks, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Self-Harm, very self indulgent

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Summary:

five kids have an eventful few days in summer. set three years after eleven comes back. kids are 15.

all bruised up grace and stolen light

Author's Note:

warning for discussion of self-harm and flashbacks as well as detailed descriptions of panic attacks, vomiting/nausea, and anxiety. there's slight mentions of body horror in the form of vomit being coloured black.

this is a modern au!! keep that in mind.

w/the implied/referenced child abuse tag, will was emotionally abused by lonnie when he and joyce were together.

wrt to the "disabled character" tag, eleven suffers from chronic joint pain as a result of spending a year in the upside down.

please tread carefully!!

nights don't often go well, but some are exponentially worse than others.

you come out of a nightmare sweating and breathing heavily, stomach churning uncomfortably that gives way to a pressure low in your belly when you roll over. you try to choke down the discomfort in your throat, warm, solid and irritating, and you try to swallow. nothing seems to be working and you're afraid that it'll be too late if you don't get up now.

your eyes slowly adjust to the soft moonlight coming through the blinds. you forget elegance and attempt to slowly inch your way down the ladder, trying carefully not to wake will below you while your head starts aching with sharp pangs. again your stomach rolls and you inhale deeply. you still at the bottom of the ladder to try to lessen the whirling inside your gut. nothing really happens.

you let out a startled gasp when your hand slips, sweaty with the effort of holding onto the silver bar so tightly; you bite your lips and try to step down quietly, feet hitting the carpet with little noise. the impact sends shock waves up your legs; your ankles ache with the collision. pressing a cold hand to your mouth, you step over one of

will's t-shirts and race out of the door down the hall to the bathroom.

the nausea has become exceptionally worse, pushing hard against your belly, reaching up through your throat; your nose starts to sting and you press yourself against the bathroom counter. you grab fistfuls of sleep-mussed feathery hair away from your face as your body lurches and you push out something murky and black; eyes watering and body shaking, you make a wounded gurgling sound as you empty your stomach. frustrated tears finally streak down when you dry heave, unable to summon anything else up to press out, sweat dotting your forehead and the back of your neck. it's a result of being in the bad place, something like the upside down; it'd affected your body so deeply that you're still emptying it of any trace of that dark place, coming out in a black mud-like substance. it happens enough on its own but sometimes nightmares just move it along quicker.

the nausea isn't completely gone but its manageable. eyes screwed shut, lip folded between your teeth, you feel the sharp spike of your oncoming headache, pushing one more dry heave to your lips. the tears run freely and coldly down your rosy cheeks.

hands shaking as you turn on the faucet, you let the gentle noise of rushing water calm you; it would almost be enough to lull you to sleep on your feet if will wasn't just outside the doorway.

"el?" his voice is muted to your ears. you blink distractedly and you turn your head slowly. will is wide-eyed and paler than usual, and his hands come up to grab at his upper arms; his wild hair and hastily tightened too-big sweatpants tell you he either just woke up or had been awake and heard you getting down from the top bunk. "you okay?"

you cross your arms, leaning back against the counter to be able to face him and squinting against the low bathroom light. "no. yes. no." your throat aches after your sick spell; its hard to get the words out, voice sounding raspy and tired. "nightmare," you manage. "bad place. papa."

will nods, eyes going soft. "me too."

you figured as much, and you can tell - his wide eyes and shaking

hands and unsure steps are all telltale signs. you dip your head. you feel overexposed, nerves raw.

“just a sec,” he says. “let me get a washcloth, then we can go back to our room.”

you nod once.

the coolness of the water is both appreciated and stinging, sensitive skin aching wherever the cloth touches, though luckily will just dabs at the sweat and at the corner of your mouth. you lap at the faucet water, which is nothing new to you; despite the stifling, unair-conditioned summer heat of the byers home you choose warm clothing: a pale over-sized yellow sweater that was lent to you by will when you got back from the in-between; black sweatpants just a little over your feet, also lent to you by will upon your return, and white socks just past your ankles. you tuck the old stuffed rabbit under your arm, given to you by mike when you told him you wanted something like the stuffed dog he has at his house. the teddy bear you once had is long gone, and you can honestly say that you don’t miss it.

when will sets the wash cloth down he offers you his arm, gentle, paying mind to your still moderately upset stomach. you both sit on the bottom bunk back in the bedroom, letting quiet settle between you, before you both stretch out carefully beside one another on the small bed and lay face to face.

this quietness between you, this understanding, this thing that only the two of you really have, its one of the most comforting things after an attack like this, second only to the reassurance of will’s breath tickling your cheek and the feeling of his heartbeat beneath your palm.

the two of you lie there for you don’t know how long, comforter pulled up to your shoulders and faces inches apart. (you think your nausea is starting to settle - you pray it stays that way.) you look at the way the moonlight falls on will’s face, take in its reflection in his big brown eyes. he’s biting his lip. you pet a hand through his hair once, eyes searching.

“what’s wrong?” you whisper.

"it - feels like it never ended," will murmurs back. (his eyes are so so scared, you notice; your heart aches for him, for this boy.) "sometimes i think i'm becoming the - thing." his voice wavers. "feels like i'm still there, somehow."

"it's okay," you assure him. "it's okay."

you get the feeling this is the most honest he's been with anyone in months. "sometimes i wake up, and my skin feels wrong," he says, barely audible. "like it isn't mine."

you don't say anything as he falls silent again, not wanting to push him. "and it - it doesn't just happen when i'm asleep? i can be awake, wide awake and i'll still see spores and bindweeds and dark. why am i like this, el?"

"don't know," you breathe. "not bad, though. just...progress. getting through. not bad though, not at all - it's okay. you're not bad."

"i keep, i don't know, having these attacks at school," he says, even quieter; you strain to hear him. "i keep having to leave class and oh god, el, i'm just so *tired* and *scared*."

"will," you hum. "it's - okay that you feel this way. the nightmares - daymares? - you're still processing it and you could be processing it for a long time but - it's not bad."

he lets out a sob, pressing his face into your neck.

"i keep saying i'm - okay but i-i'm *not* and i'm *tired*," he mumbles shakily, muffled from his position.

you want to make it all okay for him. "i know, i know," you murmur. you bring you arm over to rub his back.

he cries into your neck, the wetness of his tears burning into your skin, making something inside of you ache. the whole time you're holding him he doesn't stop shaking.

you think of how long he's kept this to himself, and suddenly you feel like crying too.

“sorry,” he sniffles eventually, eyes red and glassy.

“no, no, don’t be,” you say softly to him. your headache pangs sharply when you try to sit up on your elbow, and you can’t help the startled pant that comes out of you, feeling everything at once. “i’m okay. just - head hurts, too much, too bright. gotta close my eyes; rest a little. not sleep.” you inhale sharply as you maneuver yourself back down. “forgot how sensitive. trust me, though, it’s - don’t be sorry. please don’t think it’s - a problem.”

“el,” he says weakly. “i love you.”

you blink and sigh while he slings an arm over your side. in your head you can hear the pleading of *eleven, eleven please don’t go*, and you let out a shaky breath you didn’t know you were holding, taking his free hand in your own.

“love you too,” you say, squeezing his hand.

“el, your nightmare,” he mumbles. “do you wanna talk about it?”

“i was back at the lab,” you say tiredly. “one of the bad men - he was so mean, he grabbed my face - i bit his hand because he was hurting me, and he hit me across the face after that.” you struggle to force the tears away. “papa was very upset with me, and he made me go in that small dark room as punishment, and...will, he left me, in the nightmare it turned into the upside down and i was all alone again.

“you were there but you weren’t alive.”

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you wake up again at six in the morning. will is still asleep for once.

it’s comforting to see him asleep without screaming and thrashing. neither of you have slept very well since that fall, but you know will sleeps far less than he lets on, and it’s written beneath his eyes.

you look towards the window. the early morning peek of sunlight is barely pushing through the darkness, which you find beautiful. you rarely cease to find things beautiful now. weeds pushing up through cracks in the sidewalk despite the odds, the passing of white clouds

overhead, the way the sunlight settles over someone's face. focusing on the beauty of the world is helpful - it makes you feel like the dark could never touch you. you know its in you enough to where it doesn't even have to touch you, but like this, you feel like you're actively fighting it off which is better than feeling like you're never going to be truly clean again.

you think will is beautiful, jonathan and joyce too. nancy, lucas, dustin, mike; especially mike.

your eyes burn with sleepiness, and you tuck yourself back under the covers fully. will makes a soft noise, but he doesn't stir after that.

you tend to think when you wake up first, which is pretty much always unless will either hasn't slept or woke up because of an attack or nightmare. you remember the lab, waking up even earlier than this - four in the morning most often. your training was to begin early so that you could spend the best half of the day doing that. you were to go to bed at seven or eight.

you bite your lip, eyes drifting shut, willing the memories away.

your cheek even burns in remembrance, like last night, after you woke up. you drew blood when you bit the man. he was squeezing your jaw, patronizing you, telling you that you should know how to act in his presence. you were scared so you bit him and he backhanded you hard. you remember how you had a bruise for days. you remember the darkness, the silence.

you blink. you were a child, a terrified, bitter, broken child, and no one allowed you to be one. not once. you weren't even human. a feral little girl. blood always staining your upper lip red, eyes always big and afraid and trained on something you were meant to hurt.

the headaches still remain. just as well, you suppose, that the physical strain lives on in you. you guess that maybe you're not you unless something hurts.

it was weird learning that children aren't raised like you, aren't *like* you, aren't meant to be. you barely even said a word, but they could speak. you were taught the bare minimum in regards to language - despite being extremely perceptive you still have a hard time of expressing yourself personally. you're getting better, with the speech

thing. though your sentences are still a little stunted, you're able to connect words together coherently now. your reading level was described as a "second grader's" but you've already managed to spike your way up to a ninth grader's. you've caught up to the boys except for will. will's reading level is around 12th grade.

you sigh. you know you're not going back to sleep, not after your nightmare earlier. you never sleep more than just a few hours when you wake up like that, just because you're too restless and worried.

will exhales loudly and pushes his head into your chest. his eyes don't open but he does snake an arm over your waist like last night, probably making sure you're still there. as if you'd ever leave him awake or asleep, which you know he knows. he's a smart boy, but it doesn't mean he's any less afraid. you try not to leave him alone, if possible; sometimes you even take showers together when he's especially disconnected from reality so he doesn't hurt himself. you don't mind it at all and you understand the struggles, as he sometimes has to do the same for you after a particularly bad dissociative episode. feelings are strange and you try to make sense of them together.

you frown to yourself and push away the hair from your face. your heart aches. you know it's not your fault but you can't help but feel guilty for what happened to will. you're not sure if you actually opened the gate or if that's what you were told, but you do know that it's possible you did, and you don't think the guilt will ever go away.

you shiver as more uncomfortable memories take hold of you, like flashes in your eyes. you swear you can feel the warm water of the bath on your skin, see the bubbles over your helmet, hear your own reverberated voice. the fear in your stomach, your heart. the shriek of that monster when you reached out. the worst part was feeling like you understood it - it was stuck here and alone like you were.

that doesn't mean you forgive what it did. nancy's friend barb is gone, and will is in pain. you yourself aren't free from it. nancy came face to face with it, once, when she ended up in the upside down. joyce and hopper too, when they were able to retrieve will and revive him; you and will definitely aren't the only ones.

you know it won't close. the gate remains open even now, it's you that doesn't remain in the lab's equation, but you know something could come for you. something could come for all of hawkins and you might not be strong enough to destroy it.

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"i think we have enough to go to that ice cream place," dustin says, excited, "but we're gonna have to bike there. shouldn't be a problem, 'cause we've all got bikes now, but it might take a while. maybe a half an hour if we just keep going. have you all got water bottles in your backpacks though?"

there was a group nod, mike even holding his up. you giggle and nudge him with your elbow, and he grins as a slow blush spreads over his cheeks. his freckles are especially noticeable, now; the summer sun bringing them out and making them more noticeable, making them darker. dustin and will even have sprays of freckles of their own, will's appearing lighter than dustin's - though he does have more than the other, and they do apply a soft look to his face.

you have your own set of freckles as well, though they're very spread out, hardly clumped together, and are most often spread along your arms. dark brown and marking your skin quite noticeably, it's taken you awhile to be comfortable with them.

"it should be fine if we don't stop for too long, and if we only stop for drinks so we don't crash." dustin nods in agreement with lucas' plan, and you decide that it sounds good, especially because of the time it'll take to get there, and the fact that you'll have to bike back soon if you want to get back before dark. it's already two in the afternoon - dustin and mike didn't wake up until roughly noon - and none of you want to stay in the dark too long, for obvious reasons.

will unconsciously leans into mike's side. "we've never been here before, right?"

you smile to yourself as mike's blush darkens, pretending not to notice. "i'm pretty sure we haven't - i don't remember being there before. i don't remember hearing about it otherwise, either," mike manages.

dustin nods and smiles. "figured it would do us good. you know, get out of the house for awhile, come back for a sleepover. maybe a movie marathon later tonight too."

that does sound nice to you, to have all the boys with you, right beside you so you know they're safe. you know will worries too, that something will happen, that someone or something will come for them, whether it be more bad men looking for you or another monster that's forced its way into this world from the upside down, and sometimes it gets so bad that both you and will can be reduced to terrified sobbing messes with the need to contact the often-sleeping boys via walkie-talkie.

you'll be damned if anything happens to your family after you've worked so hard to get back, so help you.

you thread your fingers through both will and mike's, swinging your arms gently and rocking on your heels, a soft warm breeze pushing through your hair. you squeeze their hands, gentle, and detach from them so that you can mount your brand-new teal mountain bike. joyce saved up for months to get you a nice bike with a basket. you still feel a bit guilty, but you're often using it to commute to places, so you suppose that makes up for it.

lucas lets out a joyous whoop. dustin echoes it excitedly and pumps a fist in the air.

"time to venture into the unknown on the quest for ice cream - hopefully the sun stops being a little bitch so we can survive, because it's in my eyes and that's very rude and i don't appreciate it. sitting in the sky up there, bein' all smug about it and shit."

"that's very poetic, dustin," you giggle, amused.

"glad you think so, el, even though the sun is the source of all my suffering right now," dustin grumbles, pulling his hat down over his eyes. "i broke my last pair of sunglasses last week, which was not planned; i have lucas to thank for that, but that's beside the point."

lucas sticks his tongue out, rolling his eyes dramatically. "i didn't do a damn thing - shouldn't have been wearing them on the

trampoline,” he says.

will is laughing into his hands and mike sighs exasperatedly. “you’re both children.”

“shut your mouth, wheeler,” lucas laughs. “you’re no better and you know it.”

you sigh as they launch into a friendly debate. you press your fingers into your eyes, chuckling to yourself while will elbows you softly through his own giggles.

mike snorts at something lucas says, peeking at the other boy through his eyelashes and grinning as he shakes his head; you feel your heartbeat start to accelerate just a little. your cheeks feel a little bit heated too.

“as interesting as your conversation is,” dustin says, grinning lopsidedly as his foot lifts his kickstand, “we’ve got places to be and it’s already 2:20.”

you unclip your sunglasses from the front of your tanktop and pretend to rev your handlebars.

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joyce was worried that your required knee and ankle braces (required for now, at least) would make it difficult to ride your bike.

they don’t hinder you at all, not physically at least, but seeing the black blurs out of the corners of your eyes startles you occasionally, and sometimes you have to stop and survey everything around you closely to calm down. it makes you far too uncomfortable not to check at least once, and no one complains when you signal them to pull over, which makes you feel a lot less guilty.

the sun beats down on the back of your neck - the sticky feeling of sunscreen coating your exposed skin - and you hear the ever-present hum of the cicadas in the trees, flooding your senses with a dull low background noise.

the world is alive. the lazy heat casts down over everything in

hawkins, and you squint against the light, letting it bathe you in its comforting warmth as you pedal.

“shouldn’t be too much longer,” dustin announces, standing up on his pedals, arms straightened and rigid. he looks funny when he pedals and you bite back a laugh, instead making a weird noise that sounds like its between a snort and a choke, and lucas sends a very confused and concerned look your way, causing the five of you to erupt into giggles. your cheeks burn in slight embarrassment, but you think of the noise again anyway, and you start wheezing all over again, tears springing up in your eyes.

“el, what the fuck,” dustin says as he lowers himself back onto the seat. “i don’t think i’ve ever heard another human make a noise like that before.”

“i don’t really have an explanation for it but it sounded like death,” you cough out, swiping your fingers over your eyes.

“humans are creatures of beauty.”

you scoff and think about the time you all ended up in a popcorn war last time they spent the night and manage a sarcastic “right,” shaking your head but smiling. for as much as you might act like they annoy you - even with all the face-palming and rolled eyes, you know; you wouldn’t trade them for the world. there’s not a group of people you love more, and your family is weird and ragtag but it’s yours. you wouldn’t have it any other way, truly, no matter what happens.

you hear a honk and you grit your teeth, hands gripping the handlebars tightly; you realize that the five of you had been drifting more into the road than you’d thought and you pull closer to the side instead. you grimace at the car as it passes, sticking your tongue out in response.

“i hope ya’ll know what you’re gonna get,” dustin says, “‘cause we’re gonna be there in less than around fifteen minutes, if the directions are right and we’re not going the absolute wrong way.”

lucas snorts and rolls his eyes, shaking his head. “you do know that if we get lost, this is the last time you’re in charge of directions. like in

the history of ever.”

dustin waves him off, shooting a confident grin to the other boy. “listen, i know you’re worried but i got it, and i know we’re going the right way so don’t even worry about it.”

lucas grins right back. “lead the way then, oh captain.”

“what was it that i said earlier - you’re both literal children?”

“to be fair, we’re all like, five on a good day, two on other days, except for will. will is at least seven but the rest of us are in fact literal children.” your tone is lighthearted playful and you smirk at will - he’s got a hand over his heart like he’s offended. you snort as he says, “seven and a half, *excuse you*,” and turns his head like he’s ignoring you.

you can’t help the startled giggle that comes out of you, loud and open. you can’t get over the absolutely offended look he had on his face.

so maybe you made a miscalculation and you’re all at least four, including will though he might be at least four and a quarter, but either way you suppose you’re allowed to be children. lord knows you never got to be, and goddamn it you can still enjoy a little bit of it at fifteen.

as a comfortable silence falls between you, you find that strange feeling welling up inside you again. if you were asked to describe it, you’d say it’s like a gratefulness towards being alive. whatever this feeling is it’s strong and you feel it deeply, in moments like this where nothing hurts and everything is beautiful. you’d say you guess nearly dying will do that to someone but you doubt anyone would find that funny.

you’ve made a life for yourself, one that you doubt anyone from that awful lab would approve of you having. you know you have the right to normalcy, as much as a girl like you can have, and you’re not the machine they wanted you to be, ready to kneel when they call. when you think about it you realize you were treated almost like a dog, fed and housed but serving a purpose to people higher up than you.

you're not the only one that the realization infuriates, as you've got an entire group of people that love you to also be angry about it. it's something you never thought you could have but are thankful that you're lucky enough to have it.

"i told you i was going the right way," dustin snarks, pointing at a quickly-approaching building.

lucas nods and looks deep in thought before he speaks. "okay, fair enough, i'll give you this one."

dustin nods and squeaks to a stop next to a bike rack. "damn right you'll give me this one."

"you nerds. you did good dustin." you breathe in deep when you push your kickstand down. you pat your pockets and are relieved to feel both your bike lock and your money; you'd hate to come all this way, an hour in actuality, and not have one or the other. "at least we're here. i really hope it's air conditioned in there."

"i'm sure it will be. they do have ice cream in there." mike grins playfully at you, ruffling your hair lightly as he passes you, and you're pleased to see a dusting of pink across his cheeks. will is walking in perfect unison with him on his other side. he looks especially soft in the late-afternoon light.

you don't realize you're staring until he catches your gaze, flashing a shy smile, and you look away with a smile of your own and warm cheeks, heart doing that thing that it does around mike. you're not quite sure what to make of that right now, but either way you appreciate the smile instead of him asking what you're doing.

mike holds the door for you. dustin rolls his eyes but smiles anyway, muttering something about how the two of you are disgusting, and you stick your tongue out at him spiritedly but still thank mike on your way in.

"thank you," you hear will murmur as well, shy.

"no problem," mike's voice says almost kind of shakily. you hide a knowing grin, shaking your head fondly at the two of them. it's kind

of comforting to see them act this way around each other. it makes your own feelings seem less alien. or at least less difficult to understand.

then again, it's not like you really understand what your feelings are, at least for the time being. you could probably talk to will about it when you're both less shaken up. mike is also a possibility or even dustin as he seems rather knowledgeable about this kind of thing.

"i wanna get blue moon. or vanilla dipped in chocolate. no, wait: they also have superman here! oh geez, they even have strawberry..."

"dustin, don't make yourself sick," you laugh, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. "one at a time."

"aw, okay," he says, pretending to be dejected. "what do you want, el? there's a whole lot more flavors here than there is in hawkins. which is interesting considering that it's only an hour away and not like, a different town or something. i don't know. but there's a lot to choose from."

"i think...mint chocolate chip sounds good," you say excitedly.

"i don't really know what i want, if i'm being honest."

you look to lucas, who's got his chin in his hand.

"i mean, you've definitely got quite a bit to choose from," says will, eyes wide with disbelief.

"what do you wanna get, will? i'm thinking probably superman, personally," mike says. "i've only ever gotten this from the store. and even then it's not very often."

will looks deep in thought for a few moments, eyes roving the entirety of the place, before he grins and says, "chocolate chip cookie dough sounds good, right now. i'm pretty fond of it."

"they have cotton candy, god bless," lucas says excitedly. "i have no idea why it's so damn hard to find in the part of hawkins we live in but they have it!"

“okay, i got it,” dustin declares. “i’m gonna get neapolitan ice cream because you get all three flavors. that’s one of the best things about ice cream - there’s literally a kind that has strawberry, chocolate and vanilla all in one mix. it’s like a personal blessing in the form of food.”

“everyone’s decided, then?” mike asks, waving his wallet around to indicate that he was ready.

“pretty sure, i think,” you reply. “so i’m getting mint chocolate chip ice cream. will’s getting chocolate chip cookie dough, lucas has cotton candy, dustin’s getting neapolitan, and mike is getting superman - that’s all of us.”

you catch a glimpse of will sort of shrinking into mike’s side. you suddenly remember that he’s afraid of paying for things sometimes, and today must be one of those days.

“well, what are we waiting for?” dustin says with a smile, walking up to the counter.

as they move forward to pay, you quickly make your way to will. he looks incredibly nervous. his eyes are wide and worried and he looks at you with a weak smile, but you can tell he’s not doing so great. you hold out your hand and murmur, “i’ll get yours if you want.”

“i know that i should probably start to do it myself but - but i’m just not ready yet, i’m just not, and i don’t want to have another panic attack in public - i have enough of those during school as it is,” he tells you. “i appreciate that you guys don’t make fun of me for it, because i don’t think i could handle it if someone thought it was stupid or forced me to do it. it’s always been like this but ever since that fall it’s been a lot worse, and my dad used to tell me that i should suck it up, because mom and jonathan wouldn’t be around to do it for me forever. he’d get mad when i’d panic and freeze up. he thinks forcing someone into a situation that makes them anxious helps fix it, but it doesn’t and he doesn’t understand.”

“...i’m glad lonnie doesn’t live with us,” you grumble as you rub his arm.

“you know, i’m pretty sure all of us are,” will says with a soft giggle.

“he sounds like - like the bad men, when they’d make me do stuff i didn’t wanna do for the sake of making me stronger, but it didn’t. if i didn’t do something right, they put me in that small dark room, until they decided that i’d been effectively punished for my “behavior.” so i get what you mean when you say that. your dad wasn’t fair to you.” you feel a slow anger beginning to burn in the pit of your stomach at the idea of lonnie byers scolding a young frightened will, forcing him into situations he doesn’t want to be in, trying to make his anxiety just go away. “it’s okay that it scares you. one day we’ll work through it, but not through force and certainly not by yourself.”

“thank you, el,” he says softly, eyes slightly glossy. “i’m thankful that you’d do this for me, and don’t act like you’re angry at me. you’re always looking out for me, wherever we are.”

“it’s no problem to help and besides, i understand...and i care about you a lot. your well-being and comfort is just as important as any of ours.”

“i don’t know when you got so wise,” will says gingerly. “but you sound like mom right now, and you know how she is.”

you grin demurely, eyes going soft. “you think i’m wise?”

“lord knows you’ve been through enough to be, having the experiences you’ve had,” will says, hand on your arm as you step up to the counter to hand over your money for two ice cream cones. “i can only hope i’m being as helpful as you when you or one of the guys is having a rough time. i’m trying my best - you make it feel like it’s enough, like i’m not as bad at this as i feel, which is comforting - and i know my confidence issues mainly stem from my dad. you’re helping me with moving past that though. all of you are helping me start to feel like my voice deserves to be heard. i appreciate that very much, and i’m not sure i ever told you.”

“you have a habit of making me emotional in public, dude,” dustin snuffles. “like, you’re really good at that and i have no clue how, but you just are.”

"i - oh, you heard me, huh," will says shyly. "also, do i really? is this something that happens often and i just don't notice it? i'm sorry if i upset anyone, i just never get the chance to talk about that sort of thing. i mean, of course i talk to my mom and jonathan, but it's not the same as talking to one of you. oh, dustin, please don't cry - mike, wait - lucas, are you - el - oh gosh."

you wrap your arms around him gently and laugh wetly. the tears slip down your cheeks freely. you feel the other four pile on too, and will laughs from somewhere in the middle.

"you're so full of love," you whisper into his back. "sometimes it astounds me how much you can love, how capable you are of carrying all of it. you're truly a good person. you're doing so well with your coping too, and i'm so proud of you. you've come farther than you think you have."

will whimpers. "stop that, el, i can hear you, you nerd. i can't believe we've managed to have another emotional hug *in public* again, goodness - how many times has this happened now, really."

"mike, your ice cream is melting."

"shit, thanks for catching that," mike mumbles as he holds his arm out from the four of you. "i almost got that all over will's shoulder, which would've not been good but also wouldn't have been the first time."

"that's true, there was that time in second grade," will giggles. "we got those little vanilla things and he -"

"i did absolutely nothing and he has no proof," mike says quickly. "there was a small mishap with the ice cream, but we're not going to speak of it."

"wait - he got it all over the front of himself, and then on me," will snorts. you try your best to laugh but it fails; you can't help the laughter bubbling up from your chest.

"i *remember* that," dustin says, breathlessly.

"mike felt bad for weeks," lucas adds.

you can imagine a smaller mike, profusely apologizing to a smaller will. you smile.

the five of you exit the parlor, letting yourself glance back at the cashier, snorting at his very confused and concerned expression. you suppose it's not every day
five friends start crying in your parlor with their ice cream cones melting down their wrists.

"how do i return my friends because they make me cry," mike laughs when you get outside, shoving dustin's shoulder gently. "and also they bully me about things that happened in *second grade* - "

dustin laughs when he shoves him back and he bumps shoulders with you. "shut your mouth michael," he says, shaking his head. "you love us and you know it."

they fall into a playful banter and you think about how much you love them, not for the first time today.

//

you get home in the dark because you all decided to sit around and just talk after you'd all finished your ice cream cones. you'd laid yourself out between will and mike with your arms behind your head; feeling comfortable and full because of the size of your scoop of ice cream, you lazed about in the late summer heat in the shade with your favorite people. you think you were nearly drifting off into a pleasant and peaceful sleep, but you'd all decided that it was about time to head home at around 7:30.

(you think you felt a hand brush through your hair when you were halfway between consciousness and unconsciousness. you're not entirely sure, but it felt something like will's careful gentle fingers, the way he does after you suffer a particularly bad episode.)

you get home around 10:30 because you weren't all that concerned about being left in the dark, as it was summer and the sun didn't usually set until between 10 and 11, and joyce knew where you were. it doesn't mean you're not a little bit anxious that you've worried joyce, but you hope if she is worried it's not too much as you're all

together.

you hear mike and lucas talking about something while dustin interjects occasionally with his own additions. when you look to will you notice he's gone rigid and silent, breaths coming out in shaky gasps that sound uneven, his knuckles gone white from being wrapped around his handlebars too tightly.

his gaze is focused fixedly on the line of trees that surround the house, and his eyes are so wide that you can see the whites of his eyes. he looks absolutely terrified out of his mind, shoulders shaking with the force of his fear, squeezing his eyes shut to the semi-darkness, lost in whatever flashback his mind has decided to present him with at the moment, swallowing roughly.

you should've seen this coming, really, as you know how will feels about the dark, but you figured maybe he'd be okay because he was surrounded by friends.

will's panicked gaze catches your own, causing him to let out a startled gasp, jumping considerably with the shock of seeing you, especially in the state he's in right now. you don't want to scare him further by touching him before he's prepared, so you take a deep breath and close your eyes for a moment, scouring your mind for something to do to ease his paranoia and utter terror.

you don't think he even notices the tears streaming down his cheeks as he sobs. you reach out for him but force yourself to stop before you touch him, telling yourself that no matter what you can't do that without warning him.

listening closely, you head him whimpering something to himself, sure that he's not even sure what he's saying through his nervous, senseless babbling. you're starting to feel anxious because you're not sure you can talk him down just yet, but you don't want to leave him to his suffering if you can help it. it's been awhile since he's had an attack this terrible, one where he's this severely removed from reality, unsure of what's real and what's not, looking like he's prepared to bolt at any second should he feel the need.

mike, noticing that the two of you weren't following he, dustin and

lucas in, starts coming towards you. you hold up a hand to him; he stops in confusion before he spots will, still rambling mindlessly to himself, breathing not at all relaxed. dustin and lucas notice too, faces illuminated by the motion-activated light above the garage, features fixed into expressions of concern and fear.

“will,” you say softly, voice coming out sounding choked up, blinking back the burning of tears. “will, it’s el. we’re at home now, and nothing’s coming to get you, you’re safe here and i promise you that.”

his breath hitches in recognition of your voice. “i-it got me, got caught, back t-there again.” he hiccups. “d-dying, everything’s so d-dark and cold, j-just like hawkins.” he starts shaking harder and you desperately fight off the feeling of helplessness. “i-it got me again, i don’t want to die, p-please don’t - don’t let me die.”

“will, hey,” mike murmurs, careful.

“n-nothing’s real, oh god, not r-real - t-the demogogon, i can h-hear it, it’s coming for me.”

your heart is racing, working yourself into a slow panic, biting your lip as you motion mike closer. “you’re not in the upside down anymore,” you say. you startle as mike’s fingers weave into yours, and he starts attempting to ground the other boy. “will, it’s mike, i promise that i’m real. do you think you can try to focus on my voice?”

will turns those big brown eyes to mike. you notice that he looks extremely pale, the colour in his cheeks coming exclusively from the relentless crying. his chest jumps. “m-mike, mike, why a-are you here, y-you’re not safe. it’s n-not safe here f-for people.”

mike squeezes your hand before letting go, moving towards will slowly; his takes will’s fists in his own, wincing a little as will’s bike crashes to the ground. the other boy jumps violently but mike runs his thumbs in circles over will’s skin, trying to bring him out of his flashback. “if you can feel my hands just blink,” mike murmurs. “you don’t have to speak, i just need to know that you’re hearing me and feeling what i’m doing. just blink or nod your head.”

will takes a moment to respond to mike, swallowing roughly and eventually nodding once. his eyes are still wide and he's still shaking despite the summer heat; he still manages to acknowledge mike's voice, is able to confirm he can hear him. "good, good, you're doing good," mike says softly.

mike rests his chin on the top of will's head. "i'm going to hug you now if you're okay with that," he murmurs.

will nods again and lets out a sob as he presses his face into mike's chest. "p-please don't leave me in t-the dark, i don't w-wanna be in the d-dark a-anymore."

unable to keep standing in the background anymore, you move forward carefully and quietly to the two of them, wrapping your arms around the two of them shakily. you feel weak as you press your face tiredly into will's shoulder and announce that it's you, focusing on regulating your breathing that had increased in pace as you grew more concerned.

you're used to doing this, don't mind doing it. you want will to be happy and you're willing to comfort him, but you guess the dark threw you off, made you a little paranoid; you feel a little bad for starting to panic while will was in the middle of his own crisis, but everything felt like a little too much all at once for you. you still can't shake the worry, knowing that will is going to be very anxious and easy to set off in the following hours.

you and mike meet eyes and nod, both wrapping an arm around will's back to steady him, preparing to support his body weight - as he starts to come out of it he'll be weakened and exhausted. he hasn't stopped sobbing quite yet - it's possible that he won't stop for awhile, maybe even requiring another one of his anti-anxiety/insomnia meds, in order to calm him down. it's likely that he'll also be slightly out of it for a bit, and might need help getting himself into pajamas later.

what you do know for sure, though, is that you're not leaving him alone for a second. this is another one of those nights where you'll sleep tangled together, right there in case will needs you, and the boys will be here for extra comfort too.

you work on getting him to the house, whispering gentle reassurances and keeping close to him so you can hear and monitor his breathing. you'd rather he didn't pass out, as the first time he did

so you proceeded to have a panic attack, and no one needs two incapacitated kids tonight. you're going to have to watch over him closely tonight as he might not voice it if he lapses into another flashback; after seeing it happen enough, you can read the look on his face and tell if it's happening. it's always a little worrying, of course, but you know how to handle it.

will snuffles and whimpers as he presses his head into your neck. your heart aches for him right now. his breath hitches again, causing him to cough lightly, tugging on yours and mike's backs and tells you to stop.

he's cried so much in the last few minutes that he's made himself sick, as demonstrated when he lurches forward. mike's eyebrows are knitted in concern, rubbing will's back as he retches, murmuring that it's okay and he's alright, unable to keep the worry out of his voice, looking up to nod at lucas and dustin.

they've been waiting by the door, no doubt worried for the smaller boy. you feel bad that you couldn't explain what was going on as it happened.

the only way to do so would've been to yell across the yard, and you're certain that would've scared the wits out of will, and definitely wouldn't have helped the situation as it was. when will finally stands up he collapses against mike, breathing shallow but slowly evening out as he leans into mike.

"will?" mike's voice comes quietly, and you watch as he brushes a hand through will's already mussed hair. will blinks dazedly in response.

"m okay, mikey," he rasps. "just a little dizzy. my head hurts. i wanna go inside."

"we're working on it buddy," mike says, gentle. "we're gonna get you inside and sit you down."

will nods as his legs threaten to give out and mike lets out a startled noise as he catches him, lifting him back into a standing position.

“will?” you whimper fearfully, heart hammering in your chest, mouth gone dry and eyes blurry.

“he’s okay, el - dustin, lucas, can you help us out?” mike calls out, wrapping an arm around will’s back once again to steady him. “el is - i think she might be panicking - el, can you hear me?”

“i’m okay,” you exhale, nervous. you feel dustin link arms with you, lucas coming forward to pat your shoulder, worry rolling off the both of them in waves that make you feel guilty.

“we didn’t know what to do,” lucas explains. “we’re sorry. we’ve just never seen will that bad.”

“it’s not something he talks about, really,” you say softly as you begin to relax, your eyelashes fluttering as you try to blink away the heat in your eyes, the knot in your stomach beginning to untangle.

“that’s not good,” dustin mumbles.

“been trying to get him to work on it,” you say firmly. “i know it makes him feel bad because he feels like he’s being a burden, but i’m trying to get him to see that we don’t mind helping him. it’s a process. it isn’t good for him to keep it in. he’s causing himself more stress than he can handle. he’s been doing admittedly better lately, though last night we both had nightmares, but i think maybe he’s been having more attacks than he tells me about. more than he tells anyone about.” your lips tremble violently, and you feel a hot tear slide down your cheek. “it’s - he knows he can tell us these things. it’s just that he feels bad about it so he doesn’t unless we catch him.”

“that’s definitely an issue,” dustin says. “he’s gonna - make himself sick.”

“he already did just a little bit ago, made himself throw up,” you reply, sighing tiredly. “made himself dizzy. gonna be a little out of it for awhile. gotta watch him. he’ll be a lot more sensitive to stimuli than usual. might jump a lot.”

dustin lets out a long, quiet whistle. “i’m sorry we can’t do more. how can we help?”

“i don’t really know right now,” you mumble, squinting against the garage light. “we probably just have to wait it out.”

“i figured that’s what we’d do, yeah,” dustin replies. then his eyes go wide. “el, the light - “

the light flickers weakly, causing you to gasp. immediately you whip your head back to look at will, feeling your stomach drop when you see his wide eyes.

you remember how the last thing will saw before the demogorgon took him to the upside down was the light in the shed becoming impossibly bright - then it had flickered out and everything went dark, signaling the beginning of the week he spent in hell. you hope that you haven’t freaked him out too badly but you’re unsure. you will yourself to calm down. you close your eyes tiredly when you’re sure that the light is done acting up. it takes a lot out of you to be able to fight the feelings that mess with electricity.

mike starts speed-walking and is beside you in moments. will is tucked into his side, hands fisted in mike’s tanktop tightly.

“let’s - let’s just, you know, get inside,” mike stutters weakly.

“seconded,” dustin says with an air of finality as he opens the door. “we just need to sit down, get a bunch of blankets and chill out. we can put on a good movie. probably too late for popcorn but whatever. i’m fine as long as we’re all okay. i think some comfy pants are needed. that sound like a plan?”

“sounds pretty good to me to be honest,” lucas agrees. “we all need to relax. get into our pajamas. lay out a bunch of blankets and pillows in the living room or something. everything’s gonna be fine.”

“where have the five of you been, i’ve been so worried and - oh,” joyce’s voice startles you. she takes the five of you in, son exhausted and wet-faced, daughter dead on her feet, three extremely concerned friends, and her eyes soften. “what - what happened out there? will’s so pale, and he’s been crying, so has el - is everything okay?”

“we think will had a flashback,” mike says for you. “it freaked him

out bad - but we think he's coming out of it, now. he should be okay in a few hours. he did just throw up outside though. we're gonna get into our pajamas and relax. gonna try to stay up with will if he needs it. do you think he could take another dose of his meds?"

face drawn in motherly concern, she blinks and nods distractedly. "yes, of course, just a moment. i was just thinking about that."

she disappears into the kitchen, and you hear her rummaging around for will's meds and the running from the sink faucet. she comes back with a small green pill and a round white one in her palm and a glass of water.

"will baby, i need you to take this so it can help you calm down," joyce murmurs, brushing will's hair from his forehead. "can you do that for me? i promise nothing is going to hurt you, you're safe here. i won't let anything happen to you or your sister and friends, i promise you that."

"okay," will rasps. "okay." he takes both pills in one swallow.

joyce rubs his back slowly and gently, nothing but tender. she turns to you and holds out her arm, offering her side to you, and you take it.

you focus on the sound of her heartbeat, the bump of her pulse next to your head, letting her warmth and familiarity comfort you.

"i'm glad you're all okay," she murmurs.

mike's hands come to rest on will's shoulders, eyebrows furrowed and looking deep in thought.

"i'm sorry if we worried you, ms. byers," he says eventually. she shakes her head and says something else, but you're not focused enough to know what it was.

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you help will into a pair of sweatpants and a soft red sweater, hoping that the texture of soft clothing helps will's sensory issues. you frowned when you'd seen the raised faded lines on will's arms often

in a uniform pattern, some even pink and looking like they'd just closed up, and you file it away to talk to him about when he's in a more able state of mind.

you'd seen similar ones on his thighs, which didn't sit well with you. they look too intentional to be accidental.

the two of you sit on the bottom bunk afterwards, finding comfort in each other's company.

"sorry for what happened back there," will starts weakly. "i just - it looked so much like that night. i couldn't handle it, but it was already happening before i could say anything."

you shake your head. "don't be sorry," you say softly, bumping knees with him and taking his hand in your own. "this is a thing that happens and it's okay."

"i know but i feel like i'm just a problem," he tells you, leaning his head onto your shoulder, eyes falling shut as he sighs. "i'm just tired of feeling like this and i want to be okay. i know that it doesn't work that way, and that i might never be fully okay, but it's so frustrating that i can't control it. you understand this the best out of anyone we know, and logically i know you're right but it's hard to see past all the bad as it's happening."

"i understand," you say. "i'm - i'm sorry that i made the light flicker, earlier. that can't have helped."

"it's alright," will assures you. "you can't help it."

"i hope you know i care about you so much," you say, squeezing his hand.

"hard to forget." a small smile. "i think i really scared the others tonight." a pause. "mike didn't even wanna let me out of his sight."

"they're just not used to it," you tell him. "dustin and lucas told me they didn't know what to do. and mike - " you feel your cheeks heat up, and you curse your feelings. there will be time to talk about them, but that time is definitely not tonight, and for right now you'll have to push them back to focus. "mike's used to helping me through

attacks, because i had a lot of them while staying at his house for the first few weeks after i got back. he used a lot of the tactics i taught him how to use for me, and i'm thankful that he even thought about that."

will hums quietly in a low, considering way; he nods against your shoulder and takes a deep breath, exhaling loudly.

"i did kind of put everyone on the spot," will says, and you shake your head and press a kiss to his forehead.

"you know you can't help it. we just weren't super prepared to help as much as we wanted to." you frown. "i do need to ask something of you relating to your attacks though, and that's to let us know one is happening or that you feel like it could happen if you can, is that okay?"

will is quiet for a few minutes, lip folded between his teeth, eyes considering. "i can try, but i don't know if i'll be good at it, because i keep going nonverbal. can we, like, maybe make up some sort of signal if i can't talk?"

"that's actually a really good idea and i'm sure we can figure something out," you tell him. "definitely one that doesn't require sound, that's for sure." you think about how you learned about american sign language recently, keeping the idea in the front of your mind to possibly bring up later.

the two of you startle as the bedroom door creaks open, mike peeking his head in. "dustin's complaining about not watching bee movie," mike says with a sigh.

will lets out a snort. "i wish i was surprised, but you know, i'm really not."

mike bites his lip. "i was wondering if you were okay. you've, um, been in here for awhile."

"we're alright," you tell him. "we'll be okay."

mike pauses for a little bit in the doorway, but then he moves forward to sit beside will on the bed. "is there anything i can do to

help?"

"i don't know," will mumbles tiredly. "i don't know if there's anything to be done about it, right now."

mike frowns but he doesn't protest. "just let me know," he says quietly, eyes going soft as he looks at the two of you. "i'll - i'll try my best to help if i can."

you also frown at mike. "are you doing okay?"

"what? i'm fine. why - why would, um," he pauses, as if he's not sure what to say. "what, what gives you that idea, that something's wrong?"

will leans his head off your shoulder. "that right there. you babble and stutter when you're nervous and you do it when you want to avoid things, like talking."

"shit. i forget you know me too well." mike sighs. "i don't know. i'm just - thinking about how scared i was tonight."

"i'm sorry that i worried you that bad," will says, and you can hear him trying to make his voice as comforting and gentle as he can. he takes mike's hand in his own, squeezing both of your hands, and he bows forward. you smile out of pure confusion and see the same feeling in mike's eyes. that smile fades from your face when you see the shaking of will's shoulders.

"will, hey, what's wrong? are you seeing it again, is there something you see?" your heart aches. "please talk to me or do something so i know you're hearing me. please don't keep it to yourself and make yourself hurt, if you can help it."

"it's just that i-i love you both so much and i'm s-so bad at - talking," he whimpers, and mike whispers into his hair as he pulls him into his arms. "i'm - t-there's something wrong w-with me. i-i shouldn't feel the w-way i do but i do. i'm t-too messed up and i don't know how you put up with me, i-i don't..."

"oh, will, no - it's not that we put up with you," you murmur. "we help you because we love you. we want you to feel better. it's a

process and it might take awhile, and i know full well how it feels to be guilty about needing help but please don't feel bad, it's not a bad thing for you to need help."

"it's not a problem," mike says softly to the boy, eyes pooling with tears of his own. "i wish i could take away all of this pain for you, but i can't and i can only do my best to make it bearable."

"we deserve to be happy," you say, choked up. "we deserve it after everything, all of us."

will buries his face in mike's chest. "i like to think s-so, yeah."

you bite your lip. "it'll be okay someday."

mike tips will's chin up gently, looking into his big, teary brown eyes. he presses a quick kiss to the other boy's trembling lips.

you can see the shock in will's eyes, but it slowly fades out, the other boy's eyes slowly falling shut.

once they part, mike lightly motions you to him, pressing a soft kiss to your lips as well, squeezing your hand gently.

you take in a deep breath, then let it out slow, allowing yourself to finally relax. you feel the tenseness in your shoulders fade. you let out a soft chuckle.

will ends up giggling into mike's neck too, cheeks dusted in a dark pink blush that looked like it spread down to his shoulders. "wow."

mike isn't any better off - he's just as pink, if not darker. "i - i'm sorry, this is totally not the time for that."

you smile as you squeeze his hand. shaking your head, you press a kiss to the top of will's head. "i thought i was the only one."

"oh, thank god," will lets out a breath, looking more relieved than you've ever seen him. he meets your eyes and smiles widely, tugging your hand to pull you in, causing the three of you to giggle as you bump shoulders with him. you finally let yourself fully relax. you allow your eyes to close, feeling them burn, realizing you're more

tired than you thought, having been ignoring it in favor of comforting your friends. "this is nice," you mutter, reaching your hand up to play with will's hair. you register that you'd been ignoring your own feelings when in fact they've felt the same this whole time. you're not exactly sure how this is going to work, and there will be things you won't understand but you'll have them to explain things. "i've been worried about how i felt for weeks...i should've just said something sooner."

"i really should've said something to you both, especially because of...because of the school," mike replies, biting his lip and looking bashful. "i kissed you without thinking about it, and i didn't exactly explain myself afterwards to you; all i knew was that i really liked you. obviously i still do, but i kept it to myself because i felt like it wasn't the time."

will sits up and presses a hand to mike's cheek. "you can...you can talk about things, mikey. just because we're having a hard time doesn't mean you don't matter, or that your feelings don't. admittedly i've been thinking about it too though. i think we can agree that we need to work on communication with these things. but we can do it together."

you nod in acknowledgement and let out a soft sigh of contentment.

"there's things that i still don't...quite fully understand...and there will be more things, but we'll work on it. i still have things to learn...but that's okay, because i have you and people that are willing to help me, no matter how long it takes. for all the things i don't know i'm sure of this, and i know that we can...we'll make this work. it'll be fine, i know it will."

"of course we'll help you. we've...we've come too far together not to. as if we'd ever give up on this or you."

"i'm going to cuddle puddle the shit out of them," you hear dustin from the hallway. "you are too because they need that and you're part of the group. ohana means family dammit, and you know family means nobody gets left behind. now come be part of this family and help me comfort our children, lucas."

you hear lucas make an offended noise. “they are *not* our children.”

“they are tonight because i said so,” dustin replies, sounding a lot closer, “and you’re tearing this ohana apart. i am not about to file for make believe divorce, so just get your ass in here. look - i know that you’re worried. you’ve been tense all night, luke. you need this just as much as i do, and lord knows they do too. we need to all be together. it’s been a very difficult night for all of us. also if i’m gonna start crying, i’d rather be in there. so that we can all be together; it’ll be alright, they’re not mad.”

his voice shakes just a little bit at the end. you make a soft noise of concern.

“you can come in here,” will calls out, lighthearted and gentle. he sounds like how joyce sounds when she comforts you after a nightmare. “i’m sorry that i didn’t come out when i said i would...still, you know, trying to calm down. we could just sit together for a little while, just be together without anything else - we could just talk about things. come sit with us in here, come on. let’s just try to relax tonight - even though it’s at least 11:30.”

it’s later than you thought it was. you chuckle a little when you and mike gently bump heads, both looking down at his watch for the time.

“i mean it’s midnight but yeah, that would be nice if we could just do that,” dustin replies shakily from the doorway. lucas was behind him, a hand on his shoulder.

“get over here you huge nerds,” mike giggles a little bit.

they both shuffle in slowly and settle on the floor, dustin sniffing lightly and rubbing at his eyes.

“are you alright?” you ask the both of them, being as gentle as possible.

“will be,” dustin snuffles, trying his best to grin up to you. “what about you guys?”

“same,” you say, slowly settling yourself on the floor. “we’re gonna

be okay, 's just gonna be like this sometimes. we can get through it, as long as we've got support."

mike nods weakly while sliding down beside you. will slowly lowers himself on your other side. "we should...you could teach us how to help," dustin murmurs. "it'll be good if we're all prepared to help. we can't always be attached at the hip, as unfortunate as that is - but one of us should always be around to help out."

"not a bad idea at all," mike agrees. "we can work on that."

"alright. also we should go to the blanket nest luke and i built, because i'm tired as hell and i wanna watch a movie."

"as long as it isn't bee movie," you giggle as you shove dustin's shoulder, and he sticks his tongue out at you.

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when you wake up you're comforted by the sound of dustin's snoring, not wanting to get up just yet and instead curling further into the warmth at your side. your feel a slow sleepy smile make its way onto your face as you look up, settling yourself on mike's shoulder. he lets out a drowsy snuffle in response, eyes remaining closed, but he does turn his head away from you. you try to match the steady rise and fall of his chest.

you don't understand how you're the one sleeping in sweaters and sweatpants and mike is the one like a personal heater. he ended up passing out in his tanktop last night. he's a comfortable type of warm. you swear, when you think about it, you could feel it even if you weren't tucked into his side; not that you're complaining about it. you take a deep breath and allow yourself a long sigh.

mike's head turns so that he's facing you again, his soft breaths tickling your face gently, and you smile as the sunlight catches his freckles. sometimes you compare them to constellations, delighting in the way his cheeks burn pink. you've also tried to count them a few times, but you always get lost before you come up with a number.

the mellow sunlight makes his face look soft, smoothing out his

features. your face heats up as you stare at the living room window, thinking about how much you care about this boy and how you love everything about him.

he shuffles a bit, and his eyes open halfway. he looks down at you with a gentle sigh; he smiles slowly and lovingly when he sees your open eyes and he kisses your forehead, reaching up his free hand to run through your messy hair.

you lean into his touch. you let your eyes drift shut for a moment to enjoy it. when you blink them open again and reach up a hand to his cheek, he covers your hand with his and leans in so your foreheads touch. you stay there for a bit, just taking in the sight of each other - mike has some impressive bedhead, not that your hair is any type of neat and tidy, and the sleepiness adds a sweetness to his face.

“what’re you looking at,” he murmurs with a calm grin.

“you,” you respond.

you sit up for a moment when you realize that he’s trying to move his arm from under you without disturbing you. he rolls onto his side to better face you, slinging his arm over your waist carefully, pressing his nose to yours and causing you to both giggle. you lie together, two sleepy kids finding comfort in each other.

you see a disheveled dozy will pop up on his other side - he turns his head with squinting eyes before his gaze settles on the two of you and a slow smile works its way onto his face, catching your eye and pressing a finger to his lips - before he stands on his knees behind mike. before mike can turn around to acknowledge him he lets himself drape over mike’s side. his arms come out to rest on your hip.

you snort and cower into mike’s neck; he lets out a soft noise of surprise.

he looks rather proud of himself, if you’re being honest.

you sit up slowly and sigh as your back cracks, and you lean in to press a quick kiss to will’s cheek, laughing as you grab him carefully by the wrists, pulling him all the way over mike’s hip. mike grunts in

response, but he doesn't look hurt or annoyed when he sits up behind will, slowly helping him up and wrapping his arms around his middle.

you can't get over the way will looks so peaceful and genuinely happy in mike's arms. this is a special thing, you recognize, something between the three of you with the experience tying it together, other than the love you have for each other.

you shake your head and scoot forward so that you're in front of will. legs placed on either side of mike's thighs, you lean tiredly into will's chest and sigh happily.

it's like a bundle of heat and love, like the cuddle puddles that dustin's fond of creating when he feels that there's the need for one, except with only the three of you. you giggle as you hear lucas tell dustin to quiet down, sure that the other boy said it in his sleep.

you then snort fondly as dustin tells him to shut up, sitting up in confusion with hair sticking up in all directions.

"what time is it and what's going on," dustin mumbles while rubbing his eyes.

"it's...9:09," mike replies. "super early, especially for you. good morning?"

dustin lets out a non-amused grunt. he flops backward. "how am i even alive right now."

will shrugs. "early bird gets the worm."

"maybe if the early bird would stop snoring - then he could. at the moment it doesn't seem very likely - he's gonna keep scaring 'em off like that."

you blink in surprise as lucas tiredly sways upright, glaring at dustin through half-closed eyes. "well, i'm pretty sure we're all wake now as it is."

"breakfast," will announces from his cozy position. "i bet jonathan's awake and if we ask nicely he'll make us those belgian waffles, with the strawberries and whipped cream...and the syrup, obviously.

maybe he'd let us have coffee, as long as it isn't black. also i am absolutely talking about how el drinks her coffee."

you shove him in the shoulder with a giggle. you stick your tongue out while crossing your arms. "you know full well it's because of hopper, and i wouldn't drink it like that if that wasn't how he introduced it to me. and also it gets a lot less bitter the longer you drink it 'cause you get used to it. unlike *someone* i could name who spit it out the moment he tasted it."

"i didn't *mean* to get it on your sweater, listen," will tumbles forward into your chest with a laugh, and he certainly doesn't sound sorry whatsoever, but you don't care about that. "to be fair i did apologize like twenty times. i thought...i thought it wasn't gonna stain or something, and i was distraught that i possibly ruined that dress."

you think of how worried he really was, bringing the pale blue dress to his mother after you'd changed out of it, eyebrows knit together in concern and on the verge of a panic attack. you were narrowly able to comfort him, then; you think of how much better you've gotten at it, through learning about how each other's attacks work, and you feel almost flooded with love.

"in the end it was all fine," you say, eyeing will as he re-settles between mike's legs. "it was still hard for me to talk then, though. i kept trying to tell him it was okay - don't quite think my point got across."

"what she means is that i was anxious until it came out of the dryer, perfectly clean and light blue," will explains. he unfolds his legs and straightens them out in front of him. "i was not allowed to have coffee for like a month. i was actually a little wired from stealing jonathan's when he wasn't looking. i was a little shaky but i'm pretty sure that's about it, and of course i got used to it at some point. that was an interesting day though."

you lay yourself between will's legs, humming as his hands come to play with your hair. "he is no longer allowed to have black coffee."

"i still don't understand how you can drink that stuff, and that's coming from me so you know it's serious, el." dustin wrinkles his

nose and lucas nods in a *dustin has spoken* way, and you blow a loud raspberry in his direction from your limited view on the floor. “don’t use that tone of voice with me, young lady. no, but seriously, i don’t get it. tried it a few times and didn’t like it once.”

you smile lopsidedly, looking up into will’s face.

“dustin’s bullying me and it’s very rude and i don’t recall asking, even though you also bullied me. i am quite honestly offended and...i need you to fight him. fight for my honor.”

“i am doing no such thing,” dustin gasps. “i am merely stating my opinion on black coffee. my opinion just happens to be that it’s shit and i don’t wanna drink it.”

you giggle. you reach your foot out as if to kick dustin though he’s across the room. “i am offended dustin. also this is my normal tone of voice. i could fight you myself for my own honor.”

“please do not,” he says with a snort.

“ha - i am the ultimate, but...we already knew this and...and also where are you going. dustin do not, do not come any closer to me. will he’s coming for me, help - “

“you said fight you,” dustin says. he tackles you and you let out a surprised squeak. “i’m going to fight for *my* honor. lucas help me, i’m kind of scared of taking her on alone, because she’s strong. oh god...this was a mistake.”

“i’m *not* coming over there.”

“lucas, i can’t believe you’re failing me now. this is rude.”

“nah.”

you manage to pin him and you grin into his face. he reaches a hand up, pressing his hand onto your face and causing you to snicker. “i could lick your hand, if you don’t move it soon. also please keep in mind that though i don’t weigh much, i’m still able to sit on you.”

he giggles. “ew, no, okay. you win. you are the ultimate and i am but a mere mortal in your presence. are you happy now?” he blows a

raspberry. “you’d better be.”

you snort. “oh, *extremely*. nothing makes me happier.”

you hear quiet giggling from will and mike’s corner. you turn your head and smile fondly, catching their eyes, and you release dustin with a raspberry of your own.

dustin giggles for at least five minutes after that. mike ruffles your hair as you sit back against will, resting your head against his chest, closing your eyes happily against the sunlight on your eyes. you settle on listening to the thump of will’s heart, the vibrations of his chest when he speaks, and the random conversation your boys have.

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you change into your nice white summer dress; you put on your white bikini with the pastel pink roses on it underneath it, once jonathan confirms that he’ll drive the five of you to the beach, and, to comfort joyce, that he’ll watch over you, just to be safe and not to take any chances. will settles for a faded graphic tee-shirt, one you’re certain once belonged to jonathan at some point, and his orange, blue and white swimming trunks. he sits beside you in the car, tangling your fingers together, resting his head on your shoulder, talking about everything and anything, purely for the sake of talking to you.

“i don’t want to get sand in my shorts again,” he tells you probably with a pout. “it took me weeks to get it out. every time i was sure i’d washed it out, i’d check for it and immediately there was sand on the carpet.”

you cover your mouth and hide a giggle, trying and failing to disguise it as a cough. he nuzzles against you with a soft offended noise, his version of a headbutt from his very limited position.

“it isn’t the most pleasant time,” dustin agrees, turning around from the front seat to face you.

you’re pretty sure lucas is asleep from the way he’s slumped against the window, his breaths coming slow and deep, and mike looks about ready to self-destruct. he looks at lucas and smirks as he nudges

lucas' elbow, causing the other boy to shoot up with a confused noise and a soft, "what's going on?" that sounds more like "whasgoionon?"

you shake your head carefully, as you don't want to slam your jaw into will's head. you're about to scold mike when your head suddenly spikes with pain, causing you to instead grunt and bite your lip. you try to rest your head against will's, hoping it will ease the pressure behind your eyes. your stomach lurches violently; if you open your eyes your vision is swaying nauseatingly.

"el?" will's head is out from under yours in a second, and god, you desperately need everything to stop. you think jonathan asks will what's happening, but everything sounds far away, fuzzy and too loud for you to handle and you clap your hands over your ears.

your older brother pulls over while mike stumbles out of the car. will leads you out as fast as he can while being gentle, and you vomit onto the asphalt far more harder than you were prepared for. it's loud and gross and will is wincing, but - his hand is still on your back.

whimpering, you beat the ground with weak fists when you sink to your knees, body unable to handle the strain of keeping yourself upright with your vicious lurches. it goes on for several minutes, and the ground turns black with your sick.

"el, it's okay kiddo, everything's okay," jonathan murmurs, somewhere above you.

the frustrated tears slip down your cheeks. "p-panic attack i think." your voice is raspy and sounds painful. "don't know why. was fine a minute ago."

will brushes through your hair. "she was perfectly fine actually," he says softly. "i don't really know what happened."

"hey, come here, it's okay," mike murmurs, crouched beside you.

the sudden fatigue is too much and you fold into his arms. your body feels like jelly. you exhale hard to quell the remaining nausea. it doesn't do a whole lot, but - it's better than nothing, and you stomp your feet on the asphalt to shock some feeling into your legs.

when you open your eyes everything's still bright but less assaulting. you're surrounded by a circle of concerned faces. you feel something wet on your upper lip and your stomach clenches, recognition surging through your veins like electricity, and your fingers come back with blood that looks too red.

"what the hell," you mumble under your breath out of pure shock and confusion. "i don't understand why it's bleeding if i didn't do anything."

you feel like the sun is too bright, weird orange light cascading over your shoulders. you have a sick suspicion that it isn't really the sun, but you don't want to look, don't want to confirm it. "don't tell me we're under a streetlamp, please."

"el, i know you didn't mean to do that but i don't understand," mike says. "do you think - " he cuts himself off as he tries to figure out what to say - "maybe your attacks can, i don't know, cause you to manipulate surrounding stuff? because you said sometimes it happens when you're feeling something intensely, even if you don't mean to, and your attacks can be pretty intense like this one. it might, i don't know, have something to do with it."

"i don't really know what's - i don't," you exhale exasperatedly, frustration welling up inside you. you don't understand what's happening, or why it's happening now. "i don't know."

"el, breathe with me," jonathan says suddenly. "in through your nose for seven seconds, out through your mouth for eight, lift your arms up. you gotta breathe, you're gonna pass out soon if you don't, just try with me."

you didn't realize that you were dangerously close to hyperventilating until he was crouched in front of you, lifting your arms for you because you don't have the strength to keep them up. your chest aches uncomfortably, the lack of oxygen finally starting to physically affect you.

"that's it, good." jonathan counts for you when you inhale and exhale. "you're doing so good, just keep this up. everything's gonna be fine. you're okay - you're okay."

“don’t worry el. you’re fine.”

“jon?” you breathe out when your breathing is finally back under control. “we’re still going, right? we’re not going back because of me?”

he looks confused at your words. “el, you know, are you sure you want to do that? i suppose if you think you can handle it we can still go. we could have you rest when you get back, take one of your meds and have you chill out. don’t push yourself for our sake and make yourself worse.”

you take a moment to consider, while mike hands you a tissue from his backpack. you clean your nose as best you can and squeeze your hands into fists.

“i think i’ve got it, now,” you say, folding up the tissue and kneading it in your hands. you blink a few times to clear the dizziness, sighing when you notice that everything looks normal instead of heavily brightened.

you stay on the ground for a few moments, mike taking out a tissue and a water bottle, pouring some on the tissue then handing the bottle to you. you drink it gratefully but slowly, wincing a bit while mike cleans the apparent scrapes on your knees from hitting the ground earlier, and you let dustin use another tissue to wipe the sweat from your forehead. you feel a little inconvenient - you’re working on that, but when things like this happen out of nowhere the guilt comes on heavy.

will pushes your hair back from your forehead and takes two barrettes from his pocket. you know he keeps them for dustin and mike but also for you. you watch the sun glint off of them, completely transfixed, staying still while he carefully pins them in your hair to get your bangs out of the way. lucas rubs your shoulder comfortingly.

your eyes fall shut, relaxed.

mike helps you to your feet cautiously. he keeps an arm around your back, supporting you in case you can’t do it yourself, wary. you take

his hand and sigh as he helps you to the car.

you left your knee and ankle braces back home, not wanting to get sand in them: you can handle a certain amount of time, without them; you'll be a little achy but only for a day. you've got painkillers for your worse days anyway, so it's not that huge of a loss.

the absent support makes you a little bit nervous now though, after that betrayal that your body pushed on you, even though you do feel a lot more stable than earlier.

jonathan calls joyce, just to let her know - you're thankful that he's not making you talk. you'd love to reassure her, by yourself - but it'll take a little while before you can make more than one coherent sentence at a time.

you wait.

being tucked into will is a good feeling, but your stomach aches with anxiety. "i don't - won't go in water."

"that's okay, el, i know you don't like it," will says quietly. "i don't know if it'll be warm anyway, as it is. but i know that it's not a preferred thing. don't worry. you don't have to."

"okay," you breathe.

"i still don't understand the nosebleed, or the light back there," dustin says as jonathan starts the car. "i've seen it happen whenever you use your powers, but i don't think you did back there. or maybe they can work when you don't make them, but the thing is i know you have a pretty strong grip on your abilities. it's just worrying me a little. then again i know a whole lot less about it than you, and i could totally just be talking out of my ass, but it worries me that it just - happened. all of that aside, do you feel okay?"

"i feel - i'm okay enough i suppose," you reply. will squeezes your hand, mike's hand coming to rest on your knee. the knot in your stomach has yet to leave, and you feel a horrible kind of cold when you try thinking about what the attack meant. you'd like to think it was just a spur of the moment thing or increased stress. "i'll be okay

later. just gotta relax and lay in the sand.”

“that’s good, i’ve seen these things go a lot worse,” dustin says. “if you feel like you need to leave let us know, though.”

“i can do that, yeah.”

“this week has been a wild ride,” mike says suddenly. “lots of stress and emotions in all of us. it’s been difficult - i won’t lie, i’ve been feeling it myself lately; but we’ve been through worse together, and we can get through this too, i know things will get better soon.”

“i sure hope you’re right, mikey.”

he blushes faintly at will’s nickname. you smile and look out the window, finding comfort in the soft blue of the sky. “yeah.”

“to lighten the conversation i wanna make sure we brought the water guns,” dustin says with a mischievous grin. “i have to exact my revenge on mike.”

“yes, we brought them.”

from will’s other side, mike throws up his hands. “it is *not* my fault that i have such shitty aim. it’s not my fault you happened to be in the way. wrong place, wrong time. it was weeks ago. i didn’t even mean to. if you’re going to annihilate me please don’t kill me. and do not cheat this time. that means no water in the eyes, no stealing my water gun, or pushing me in the lake because i swear to god i will destroy you.”

“excuse you, i have never once cheated at a water war in my entire life, thank you,” dustin gasps, slapping a hand over his heart. “i can’t believe you’d accuse me of such things.”

“i sure can,” lucas pipes up. “ya’ll wonder why i don’t engage in those battles anymore.”

“excuse you too,” dustin replies.

“there’s no excuse for me,” lucas says, so nonchalant that you let out a giggle. “and anyway, you absolutely cheat at water wars. you know

it. don't lie to yourself."

"cheating is a harsh word," dustin says. "i prefer "bending the rules.""

lucas lets out a snort, rolling his eyes but still grinning.

"*bending the rules*, he said," lucas repeats.

"i'm gonna kick your ass," mike grumbles. "my blue gun and i will be fine." he kicks the back of dustin's seat, face scrunched up. "listen - do not mock me."

dustin turns around again, staring mike down. he grins when mike starts giggling despite himself. "you can't even take yourself seriously right now."

mike smirks. "while that may be true, at least i'm not a cheater."

"stop - this is slander," dustin announces dramatically; he even makes a fainting motion. "you are dirtying my good name with your lies and slander michael. i am being attacked - el, mike is being very dishonest right now."

"and this here is why i hid the water guns," will whispers almost inaudibly, and you can't help the amused snort you make. "this happens every single time. neither of them will back down, so this goes on for who knows how long, until one of them wins or they forfeit. it is pretty funny if you're just watching though. i did try to play once. it did not end well, so. i just sort of referee."

there's a weak-sounding laughter coming from somewhere, and it takes you a few moments to realize that it's you.

"i've seen them fight with nerf guns," you say quietly, focusing on how your words come out. "they get vicious - almost kind of scary. i remember jonathan watching them for like five minutes and he looked worried. he asked me why they were trying to kill each other, and if there was something he should do. we were at least twelve - he didn't know why i couldn't stop laughing."

will nods in recognition, shaking his head in fondness at the memory.

you allow yourself to close your eyes again, finding comfort in the lull of the continuous conversation. you smile when you realize lucas is asleep again, as demonstrated by both his silence and very light and soft snoring, and you wonder how long it'll be until he faces another rude awakening.

you sigh. the darkness for once seems very welcoming, if only for you to escape for a little while.

you think you fall asleep but you're not sure.

your eyes open suddenly when you're being shaken, someone telling you that the car's stopped.

"we're here now, el," comes will's gentle voice, the warmth of him taking your hands in his helping to wake you up, almost solely enough to bring you to full awareness. "jonathan said it's gonna rain later. we probably won't be here long. can't go swimming in a storm, lightning and all that is dangerous. i've never gone swimming in the rain. i wonder what it feels like - you're already in the water. it's gotta be a weird feeling, like crying in the shower...i wonder if anyone's gotten struck? like in general. don't know. doubt it's common, though. people know not to stay in storms. all people but me i guess."

you brush your thumb over his cheekbone. "you're rambling again and to be honest i've never been swimming in rain either, but i bet water gets in your eyes. more than usual anyway, because you're already in the lake or pool, but i don't know. but i was wondering...will, are you alright? you and mike have similar responses to stress, at least at first. is there something bothering you?"

he melts into your palm and holds it there with his hand. you press a quick kiss to his lips. pressing your foreheads together, you hold his free hand over your heart. he sighs eventually - like something heavy is on his shoulders, something he's carrying with him, enough to worry him. you push your hand up into his hair and softly twirl it. the way you fit together is always a consolation. you think it calms him too, as he often is more likely to talk afterwards.

you kiss his nose, opening your eyes and pulling back. you take his hands in yours and hold them like that for a few moments. he bows his head but you know he isn't crying.

for a moment he presses his head into your chest like a headbutt, but it's soft - something like a nuzzle, but he lifts his head up and you see how tired he looks.

"i'm just so scared, el," he says eventually. "every time things start getting better something happens. i don't want to feel like this for the rest of my life."

you nod because you understand and because you share his worries. "i know. it's tiring, feeling the same way for such a long amount of time. i don't know when or how but i know that someday these feelings will be easier to deal with."

he nods and sighs softly as he stares past you. "i just wish it could be now," he murmurs before turning his head so he can look at you. you bring your hands up and place them on his cheeks, again brushing your thumbs over his cheekbones. he looks down and leans into you, a sad sort of smile on his face.

you take your hands away and intertwine your fingers with his, pulling him with you out onto the beach into the sun, the sand comfortably hot under your toes.

he has his towel over his shoulder and you let him choose a spot. he picks one in the sun so you can lay out, and you smile as you hear mike shouting, probably at dustin; you sigh as he rolls to avoid one of dustin's shots. lucas watches on while swimming around the same area so he can view the battle, shaking his head, splashing them and laughing when they get too close.

once the towel is laid out over the sand will relaxes. you sit close beside each other, and you rub his back a few times as you watch your boys goof off.

you catch sight again of his arms, and amidst the freckles there seem to be even more red lines.

"i wanted to talk to you about something," you say softly, squeezing his hand and hoping he knows you're not angry.

he exhales. he squeezes your hand back carefully. "alright," he tells you. he watches mike skid in the wet sand. will lets out a rather amused giggle, surprised. he shakes his head and smirks, and you giggle softly.

"nerds." you bite your lip. "i wanted to um, i wanted to ask if you were okay because your arms and thighs seem pretty scratched up."

will stiffens, blinking rapidly but not taking his hand from yours. "i was sort of hoping you wouldn't notice," he mumbles. his voice is anxious.

"i um, okay, so." he takes a deep breath. you squeeze his hand again. he bites his lip hard and you whisper that it's okay - he lets it go and you allow yourself to relax, instead squeezing his free hand into a fist. he looks like he's not quite sure what to say, and you're sure that this can't be easy to talk about. you're pretty sure you're the only one who's noticed because will has a habit of wearing concealing clothing back home. you wonder how many days he's suffered through, sweating so he wouldn't worry anyone, keeping it to himself. "i'm sure you're wondering where they came from, and why they're there when i don't go into the woods, at least not on my own. you're not gonna like it, so i guess i should just come out with it. um. when i'm having a particularly bad day or having a hard time coping, sometimes i get hurt. this is going to sound really messed up but seeing my blood sometimes helps calm me down because i know i'm the one that drew it. the thing is, nothing is hurting me. *i'm* the one hurting me."

you nod because he's only confirming your suspicion. he whimpers a little and lays his head on your shoulder. you gently massage his knuckles, trying to calm him, knowing that this is very difficult.

he falls silent, just breathing slowly and carefully. you're sure he's trying not to panic. you wonder if he's worried about what you think, so you try to reassure him.

"i don't think there's anything wrong with you, for thinking that it's calming. i don't want them to get infected, even though i know you can take care of yourself. i know it's a coping strategy, but i know that it's an unhealthy one." you blink a few times. "i don't know how

to help you, but anything i can do i will. i don't want to tell you to stop for me. i don't want to guilt you into recovery."

he makes a choked noise, pressing his face into your neck.

"i love you." you kiss the top of his head gently. "i want you to be safe and happy, and if i can help i want to. just tell me what i can do and i'll try my best. i can't promise to be perfect, but i can promise that i'll give my all."

"just be there, please," he whimpers, muffled, and you slowly start pushing his fingers out of the fist they're in. there's bloody crescents in his palm and you frown. "i'm always right here, will, right here and i'm not going anywhere. neither is mike - lucas and dustin are here too. you're always going to have us. please don't ever think you're a burden for wanting us with you." he makes a soft noise and shakes. "i do need to ask something. when was the last time you did that? some of the lines on your arms look redder and new like they were made just recently. i just wanna make sure that i know what state they're in."

you hear his breath hitch and for a moment, you feel terrible for saying anything. you manage to get past it in a few moments, remembering that this is necessary.

"some of them are from last night," he admits ashamedly. "between having an attack and the guilt because of it everything was too much. i had to do something, something to get it out. i got sick when i went to the bathroom at like two in the morning, and before i knew it i was bleeding, and i didn't wanna make noise looking through the drawers for bandages. i just let them stay open. the worst part is the sting. that's what hurts. if i wasn't so messed up, it would be enough to keep me from doing it. it used to be, back when i tried to for the first time. you get used to it."

he sits up and shakes his head, glossy eyes that have yet to shed tears, biting his lip so hard you're sure he's going to draw blood, and you have never felt so helpless. your stomach clenches with faint panic, unsure of what to do next.

"every time someone new talks to me, they ask if i'm the boy who

came back to life,” he mumbles at the ground. it sends a jolt through you to hear his voice take on any kind of bitterness. “that’s not what it’s about. they don’t know how i am now. i wish i wasn’t. i wish the demogorgon never came for me. i don’t like being this way at all. how could anyone understand that i don’t - “ he cuts himself off, abrupt, voice thick with emotion - “sometimes i don’t want to be me, how messed up is that? i don’t always wanna be will byers. i don’t wanna be the boy who came back to life. they don’t even know what happened.”

your eyes sting with the presence of tears and you shake your head. you don’t know how you didn’t see this coming, didn’t already know that of course he hates it: you never wanted to meet the monster either, and the two of you hardly had a choice, but you were never a normal kid with a normal life that had that stolen from you.

you’ve always been like this and you know it’s different, almost entirely so and your heart gives a lurch: you don’t know if you’re in a position to ease his discomfort. you wish what happened that fall had never occurred too, but you can’t change the past or ease the guilt that it was your fault it got out of the upside down in the first place.

you shake your head to dispel those thoughts. now is not the time for your own breakdown, not when will is hurting so much, but your stomach still aches all the same. you want to say something but you’re not sure what: if you say the wrong thing this could easily and quickly make things worse. you need to find something that keeps the guilt out of your voice, to say something that won’t make him feel guilty either, and you wish you were better at this.

you can only say the same thing so many times, before it loses meaning.

“i’m not going to pretend i understand how that feels,” you settle on saying, voice controlled and as gentle as you can make it. you take his hand again and just hold it. “i can’t speak as though i’ve been through the same, but i can say that how you feel is okay, that you don’t always want to be will. sometimes i don’t really like being me either.”

he looks at you, eyes going soft, letting out a heavy breath. he looks

like he wants to say something, but he doesn't and instead he just stares. you're a bit worried; he could be dissociating. you're not always entirely aware when it happens, but you can tell by the spacey look on his face, and when someone speaks to him he doesn't hear.

"being will doesn't have to be perfect," you tell him. suddenly you are bone-deep tired, emotionally exhausted, but still with the need to make sure he understands. his mouth forms a taut straight line. "will's still here, he's just different, and that's okay and it happens. you don't have to be the way will used to be, to please anyone or make them stop worrying. being will doesn't always have to be gentle, or pretty or nice or easy to deal with. there's no one way being will *has* to be. things change with time - people and seasons and pain - and that's okay, because whoever you end up as is still you, and still worth loving."

he exhales and it sounds like a wheeze, his lips trembling as a tear slides down his cheek. he swipes at it, as if trying to stop himself in a last-ditch effort, but the tears come faster than he can wipe them away.

he looks tired, his big brown eyes sad.

"i don't feel l-like will byers lately," he manages. he swallows hard and tries to still his shaking, but it proves unsuccessful. "i-i don't know w-who i am anymore half the t-time. s-sometimes things d-don't even seem like t-they're real. i-its hard to know w-what's real and w-what's not; i-it's gotta be weird t-to have some kid ask you i-if everything's r-real. all i want is t-to be normal, and i n-never will be. it's never going to h-happen and i will never be t-the same."

"will - " your vision gets blurry. it clears with wetness trailing down your cheek, and you curse your feelings for betraying you. it's hard to give advice when you're crying; you're in no better shape than the other person. "none of us will ever be normal. that's okay. we're okay. sometimes it - most times it really sucks. i know. we're allowed to be jealous and angry and upset about it. we deserve happiness too. even i get angry sometimes thinking about it, about how i was supposed to be someone's little girl. but i'm not. i'm not and it's okay because i already have my family."

he slams a fist into the ground. you know that he's not angry with you but you can't help the spike of fear that rushes up your spine. he stills and just lets himself tremble, taking big gasping breaths and hiccuping. he's kept this in for too long, and you're allowing him to let it go, so he does and it doesn't have to be pretty.

"i'm trying," he sobs out. you swallow hard and your throat aches with tears. "i'm trying so hard to get myself under control, get better, and i'm not. i k-know it'll take time b-but i'm sick of w-waiting for it to happen, e-even though that doesn't c-change a single thing."

"you're allowed," you murmur, running a hand through his hair. "you're coping, that's all that matters right now."

you look up to the sky, noticing the heavier clouds have started rolling in. when you look to the lake you find all three boys and jonathan there.

neither of you speak, for a few long moments. you find that you're too tired to speak too much right now, and you can't imagine that will be faring much better. you sit tucked together and crying - silence interrupted by sniffing. tears collect at your chin, causing the skin to become itchy, and you wipe them with the back of your hand. your nose feels far too stuffy; it feels like a bad cold. your eyes burn when you close them for a moment, and your head pangs with the distant thundering of an oncoming headache.

mike yells from the lake. you hear a large splash, and you smile weakly.

the sky flashes - you flinch despite yourself.

when the thunder comes you feel like the earth is shaking, and you hear the boys shriek and splashes as they all but leap out of the water. your knees and ankles ache in protest but you stand anyway, taking will's hand and pulling him up to stand with you, wiping the remaining tears from his cheeks with your thumb, and you race down to the water.

mike sends you a crooked smile when you dig your toes into the wet sand. something inside of you feels brave, new.

you hold up your hands to the sky, as if asking for the rain to just come down. will looks at you with confusion in his eyes, but he offers you a small smile anyway, and you grin as you tangle your fingers together again and squeeze.

you squeak when you feel mike lifting you up and you let go.

“what are you two doing out here,” he murmurs, this beautiful grin on his face as he spins you around, setting you down and turning to will. “it’s about to storm and we’ve gotta go.”

will also gets lifted and spun, his arms around mike’s neck as he laughs - his smile reaches his eyes.

you don’t really answer his question and instead shrug, smiling and looking up to the grey sky. you used to be scared of storms. right now you’re not though - even when the lightning flashes and the sky goes white, you’re laughing with tears in your eyes. right now you feel different.

you feel like you must look really weird, especially after having that conversation with will and crying like you did.

right now though you feel the storm all around you, the smell in the air, the way the thunder echoes inside you. when the rain starts coming down and turn your face up, stomach turning with some emotion. you think about what you said, about how it’s okay to feel upset that you’re different, and your heart thumps against your ribcage.

“things are going to get better, i know it,” you breathe out. will’s hand twines with yours, and mike’s on your other side, and you breathe in deep. “we’re going to get better. even if it’s not now. we’re allowed to be angry and sad about it right now.”

dustin and lucas holler from the car, telling the three of you to hurry up, or they’re gonna leave without you. you laugh and turn around, something in your veins making you feel like nothing can stop you.

“okay,” you say. you close your eyes one more time and breathe: everything is not okay, you know full well that there’s things to work

through, but right now you want to let go.

“el,” will says. “i hope that you’re okay. you’re acting a little weird. but you look happy so i guess it’s alright. maybe i can be happy too.”

gently - with all the softness you possess - you kiss him, careful and cautious and safe. he kisses you back with a certain urgency, and your heart clenches but for once not out of pain. when you part mike is smiling still. he tugs your hand gently, pulling you and will with him as you speed to the car. you shriek and giggle as the rain starts coming down hard; the way it sounds pelting the sand is weird, but it doesn’t scare you.

you hurry into the car, hair stuck to your forehead and soaking, but you’re laughing with this smile on your face. dustin eyes you concernedly, while lucas instead opts to rest against the window, eyes tired. you catch jonathan’s eyes in the mirror.

there is this particular softness inside you; you were raised to be hard and cold but you refuse. there is strength to be found in being soft, beauty in small gentle acts of kindness, as it is. you decide that you’re going to try to be better, try not to let things drag you down when there’s something to be done about them. that isn’t to say you can ignore your trauma and aching, but you can learn to better cope with it.

and, you can learn to accept help from others. you don’t have to carry this alone.

“we should make s’mores on the stove,” will says. he smiles through his exhaustion and you exhale - something inside you finally settles. you only nod, smiling widely.

“we can watch the force awakens and make popcorn too,” you add. “just hang out and have a good time while it rains. i’m sure mom won’t mind if you stay to wait out the storm, and hopefully neither will your parents.

“well - my mom should be alright with it, i’m sure - “ mike says excitedly. “she doesn’t have to work so i don’t have to watch holly, and god knows my dad doesn’t care about what i do as long as i let

him know. and - i really wanna watch that movie again, if i'm being honest, i really enjoy the story and colours and characters. then again i enjoy star wars. anyway i wouldn't mind watching it, and if we can all agree on that, we should make hot chocolate with the popcorn and s'mores, too."

you feel a comforting heat flood you. there's nothing you'd like more than to spend a cozy afternoon with friends in the muggy not-quite july heat, drinking hot chocolate despite the season and watching a movie you've seen plenty of times. you can already hear the debate on who rey's parents really are and where she comes from, and you smile because you wouldn't trade it for anything.

"i'm just excited to hear el mimic bb8," will says kindly, flashing a smile. you elbow him good-naturedly. he giggles and elbows you back, just as soft.

you feel the itching in your fingertips, the feeling bubbling in your chest, and for once you know what to do about it. you roll down the window and lift yourself to scream to the wind, something wonderful in the rain hitting your cheeks. you scream from your heart.

it's not a pained scream. it's more like a howl of joy, of feeling alive, and it is so powerful. you hear mike cheer you on - and you hear dustin join you.

the world is *beautiful*.

//

you're awake.

you vaguely remember drifting off, eyes heavy with the feeling of contentment and safety after drinking two mugs of hot chocolate and three s'mores, feeling too full to move and appreciating how that feels.

you're laid out on the couch. there's a soft blanket covering you up to your shoulders. the lamp casts a dim warm light over the living room, the window dark and covered by the curtains.

"eleven," comes mike's sleep-muzzy voice. you scan the room for him

only to find him propped up against the couch. he and will had made the blankets you'd laid out earlier a makeshift sleeping arrangement, passing out after lucas and dustin made their ways home. will is actually still tangled with mike and his head rests in the space between mike's jaw and shoulder, seeming to fit almost perfectly, and you can't help the smile that lights your face. "well hello."

"hi," he rasps out, sounding muffled from his spot on the floor. "good morning."

"it is literally not even morning," you yawn out. "it's probably like...seven, eight at the latest? i guess for us it's morning, anyway. did you see joyce come in before you passed out, by any chance?"

mike blinks sleepily, as if having to think about your question; you smile fondly and reach a hand down to play with his hair.

"she got home at like five," he tells you. "you were asleep, and she didn't wanna wake you up. there's leftover pizza in the kitchen for dinner. she and my mom went out, probably for drinks - or at least i think so - and she said i could stay here, and ms. byers was okay with it so."

"sounds good to me," you yawn again, rubbing your eyes. you struggle to wake up all the way and mike yawns back, loosely threading your fingers together. will sighs softly over mike's collarbone; you watch mike shiver and hide a smile. "she deserves a break, especially with how work's been going," you tell him.

he nods and lays his head back down. he makes a soft noise, closing his eyes as you trace from the crown of his head to the back of his neck, feather-light touch and swirls through inky hair. you're always struck by his beauty; like a punch to the gut but not as painful. you bring your hand away only to crack your knuckles, which pop satisfyingly like your jaw does when you press it.

"doesn't hurt?" he asks, sounding exhausted from speaking. "nah, 'course not."

you smile down at him, sitting up briefly to stretch and crack your back. you thrust your arms out, elbows clicking after having fallen

asleep. your neck comes next and only then do you sink back into your nest.

“doesn’t hurt at all,” you tell him. you flex your toes and feel them crack as well. “it does make me sound a lot older than i am though.”

he nods carefully and pulls will closer to him. “i’m so warm right now that i don’t know how i’ll get up.” his eyes fall shut. “also my boyfriend is asleep.”

you hum softly and reach your hand back out to his head, taking pleasure in the silky feel mike’s hair always possesses.

you sigh and let your own eyes fall shut for a moment, breaths coming slow and deep.

“both of my boyfriends are pretty much asleep,” you say eventually, mouth feeling fuzzy with the lingering tiredness. your headache from earlier is gone, you realize belatedly; that must be why you were able to sleep at all.

mike makes a noncommittal noise in response. you laugh softly and twirl his hair around your finger. “we could probably sleep for like two more hours, if you’re ready to be awake for awhile after that.”

he groans. “do you wanna set the alarm on my phone,” he mumbles, nodding towards the table next to the couch. “i don’t wanna wake will up, and also i’m pretty sure i’ll mess it up. i’m not ready to function yet - i need like, more time to cope with being awake.”

you smile. “you’re such a dork. i’ll set the alarm, and you go back to sleep. can we just keep the lamp on? it makes me feel better.”

“of course,” he murmurs, eyes soft. he sleepily kisses your fingertips. “i think you should go back to sleep too - then when you get up you can take your meds and put on your braces. will can take his meds too, and we can watch t.v. or something.”

“sounds like a good plan to me,” you mumble.

“and so wheeler and his two byers fall asleep once more,” he mutters into the pillow. “i love you.”

you blush and smile as you reply, "love you too."

//

you wake up to your boys playing a video game, nudging each other, trying to distract each other from the screen. you sit up slowly and groan, back popping and aching from your sleeping position - the back of your neck aches from the awkward angle, and your jaw cracks when you open your mouth in a big yawn, trying to fight off the sudden lightheadedness and black spots over your eyes as you stretch your arms over your head, wrists and elbows clicking.

"hey, good morning sleeping beauty," mike teases. you smirk as you twist your upper body, cracking your back and sighing happily.

mike sets the controller down, ruffling will's hair softly as he passes and walks over to you.

"hey there," you hum.

"hey there, yourself," he murmurs back, leaning in for a slow sleepy kiss. you bring your hands up to his cheeks and brush your thumbs over them, eyes closing and breath evening - when you part he smiles. "it's almost 9:30, right now. we didn't wanna wake you up - i know you have a hard time sleeping anyway."

"mom said mike can spend the night."

"well yeah," you yawn, flexing your hands and sighing. "it's light outside but it's only the three of us together."

mike nods happily. "romantic trio stays together for another night, claims they'll get wild but wild means staying up until two a.m. and drinking fanta."

you let out a snort and shake your head, grinning at the truth in that statement. he left out the part about orange fanta coming out your nose, but that did only happen once so you'll excuse it, even though he's the one that caused it in the first place. you beam as will shuffles over to you, standing on his knees and leaning his head up to kiss you as well - he folds his arms on the cushion of the couch.

“hey,” he says when you part, exhaling against your face and you laugh.

“hello,” you breathe out, mussing his hair, “good morning.”

“we’ve got all night to raise hell or just play some games,” mike says, settling beside you on the couch and will choosing your other side, “and to be honest the latter is a lot more plausible with us.”

“true,” will agrees. “either that, or...we pass out early.”

“did you mean: the events of today after we got home,” you giggle. “well, i’m glad my boyfriends are awake and ready to be the best nerds we can be.”

will blushes and mike grins toothily.

“you know it,” mike laughs, poking your cheek and then booping you nose gently, “we’re the life of our own party. which is less of a party without dustin and lucas. but even so we’ll have our own sleepover party, because we totally haven’t done that before. what do you think?”

you and will give each other amused looks - and you smile.

“what do i think,” you say. “i think you’d better get another controller.”